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ABSTRACT

In recent years the Lincoln, Nebraska public school system has increased the amount of material available for the evaluation of its educational programs and has organized it for use in decision making situations. This position paper summarizes the current situation, and clarifies policies and procedures for educational program evaluation. Two terms, assessment and evaluation, are defined and compared. Suggested roles and responsibilities for educational personnel who are implementing an evaluation study are also included. (Author/MV)

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Lincoln Public Schools
Instructional Services

POSITION PAPER ON ASSESSMENT

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RON BRANDT

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People making decisions about education need accurate information. In recent years the Lincoln schools have taken steps to increase the amount of available information and to organize it for use in decision-making situations. This paper is intended to summarize current circumstances, define terms, and clarify policies and procedures.

Goals. The following goals for assessment and evaluation were established earlier by Cabinet.

1. It is a goal of the Lincoln Public Schools that each of its programs be assessed for effectiveness in terms of the goals and objectives established for that program. This implies:

   a. That each program establish goals and objectives.

   b. That prior determination of how outcomes are to be assessed be a part of each program statement.

   c. That a schedule or timetable for the assessment be established.

   d. That responsibility for gathering and reporting the assessment data be fixed.

2. It is a goal of the Lincoln Public Schools that appropriate decision-making individuals or groups are informed of available assessment and evaluation results.

3. It is a goal of the Lincoln Public Schools that assessment and evaluation results be considered whenever programs are modified.

Background. For many years the Lincoln schools, and most other school systems in the United States, have used standardized tests to measure pupil performance. Conventional "normed" tests can be used for certain purposes--for example, comparing achievement of individual students with that of others, and comparing groups of students with students in other school districts--but they are not designed to measure specific outcomes of instruction. Some of the performance contracting experiments conducted in the late 1960s and early 1970s suffered because the standardized tests used in their evaluation proved insensitive to program differences.

That experience, and the work of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, convinced test developers that there was a need for instruments which would measure specific objectives. Many such "criterion referenced" tests are now on the market, and school districts across the country are investigating them or have already begun using them.

As an experiment with this new kind of assessment, Lincoln schools administered exercises in citizenship and writing during the 1972-73 school year. The exercises, which had been developed by National Assessment of Educational Progress, were selected because they were designed to measure goals shared by the Lincoln Public Schools.

Later the Educational Service Unit established an evaluation team. Their primary assignment is evaluation of special projects supported by state and federal funds, but they also play a role in evaluation of local projects and development of a more comprehensive assessment program.

Definitions. For communication purposes, it may be helpful to clarify the meaning of certain terms. For example, *"measurement," "assessment"* and *"evaluation"* are related processes, in that they involve collection of information, often including test results.

As used in this paper, *measurement* is the process used to collect data. *Assessment* can best be described as a procedure to determine how well (to what extent) selected goals or objectives have been met. *Evaluation* involves making explicit judgments about effectiveness or merit of something.

Assessment and evaluation can be compared as follows:

ASSESSMENT	EVALUATION
1. Establishment of goals or objectives to be measured.	1. Determination of the standards and measures to be achieved if something is to be judged as effective.

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2. Measurement.	2. Measurement in relation to standards (assessment results can be used).
3. Reporting of results in relation to goals or objectives.	3. Decision-making about effectiveness or merit of something in relation to expected standards.

In very general terms, educational assessment answers the question, "To what extent did the learners achieve selected objectives?" Evaluation focuses on the question, "Was the approach effective in achieving expected standards?"

Large-scale assessment often involves measurement of cumulative effects from a variety of experiences over several years. To the extent that it does, any resulting evaluation must be somewhat general.

Focused evaluations such as those conducted by the E.S.U. evaluation team are usually designed to determine effectiveness of a particular treatment or program, so the evaluators attempt to exclude as many unrelated variables as possible. The evaluators may refrain from making judgments themselves, but they organize the data in such a way that judgments can be made.

"Needs assessment" another process which deals with the collection and interpretation of data. When a needs assessment is undertaken, (1) standards that should exist are established, (2) the status which exists in relation to those standards is measured, (3) the gaps between "what should be" and "what is" are determined and, (4) priorities are set in relation to the gaps. As the information used deals with "standards," needs assessment can be viewed as closely related to evaluation. The ultimate purpose of a needs assessment, however, is the determination of priorities within a program.

"Goals" and *"objectives"* are two other words which are often used interchangeably. Both refer to educational aims, and any distinction between the two is partly arbitrary. As used here, *goals* are statements which are limited to desired outcomes (for example, "Spell frequently used words correctly."). *Objectives* include information about time, conditions, and measurement criteria. For example, "By the end of their fourth year of school at least 80% of the students at Washington School will be able to spell frequently used words correctly as demonstrated by their passing with no mistakes a district-developed test."

Relationship to Goals. Over the past several years, the Lincoln Schools have followed a pattern of declaring goals--and sometimes objectives--for all programs and projects. The intent is to maintain system-wide coordination while providing for active planning at the local school level. It is almost self evident that an adequate assessment and evaluation system is heavily dependent on well defined goals. A school system can not expect to know how it is doing until it states clearly what it is attempting to do.

A major goal of the Lincoln Schools (adopted by the Board of Education in 1970) is to "provide equitable opportunities for a basic education plus some opportunity to extend individual talents and interests." The assessment plan should reflect this goal. All students (or a random sample of all students) should be assessed for attainment of outcomes (such as reading) which are considered parts of basic education. Assessment of many other outcomes (for example, ability to play the trumpet) should involve only those students who have chosen--on the basis of individual talents and interests--to work toward that goal.

Considerations in Assessment. A program of routine standardized tests is relatively inexpensive and easily administered. Factors to be considered in development of a more comprehensive assessment program include the following:

1. Although it might be desirable to have complete information at all times about outcomes of all programs, that is probably an unrealistic expectation. Instead we will concentrate our efforts and resources on assessment of selected programs.

2. Because curriculum related assessments may be expensive and time consuming, most will be administered less frequently than every year. For that reason, there should be a long-range plan listing areas to be assessed several years in advance. In some cases the assessment exercises need to be tried with sample groups of students before they are administered system wide.

3. In order to minimize inconvenience to students and teachers and interuptions to instruction, assessment should be tied as closely as possible to the regular instructional program. The composition assessment is planned so that the writing exercises may be given as a regular class assignment. Whenever feasible, tests used for assessment should yield information which is useful to teachers for planning instruction.

   Some assessments may actually consist of mastery tests administered to individuals at the time they complete a segment of instruction. The "assessment" will be compiled from student records.

4. Another way of minimizing the amount of testing required of individual students is sampling. Many assessments will involve administration of different items to different students. The results will have limited usefulness to individual students and teachers, but will yield helpful information about achievement of groups of students.

Roles and Responsibilities. Roles and responsibilities in the total assessment program are not yet fully clarified. The following are suggested:

Associate Superintendent for Instruction

1. Develop philosophy, policies and procedures for approval by Cabinet.
2. Supervise development of the assessment plan and all phases of the assessment process.

Administrative Assistant

1. Help to determine the goals of the assessment and the uses of the information to be collected.
2. Consult with others in selection of appropriate objectives and tests or exercises.
3. Announce district-wide assessment schedule: arrange for distribution, administration and processing.
4. Report assessment results; involve others in interpretation and use of results.
5. Assure that assessment results are stored for later retrieval and study as needed.

Consultants

1. Develop goals for district programs; consult with others on development of objectives for special projects, school programs, etc.
2. Help to determine what information is needed for decision making.
3. Advise on selection of tests or exercises.
4. Involve teachers and other staff members in all phases of the assessment process, including analysis, interpretation and reporting of results.
5. Analyze and interpret assessment results in more detail; develop plans to improve instruction based on assessment results.

Director of Student Services

1. Provide the support services needed for ordering and inventory, distributing, receiving, and storage of district-wide testing/assessment materials.

Evaluation Team Members

1. Provide technical assistance in design of the assessment plan and in related matters such as definition of goals, selection of tests, development of sampling plans, analysis, interpretation and reporting of results.

Principals

1. Advise on information needed for decision making and on appropriateness of tests or exercises used to gather the information.
2. Supervise administration of tests and exercises to insure that students have reasonable opportunities to demonstrate the skills they have.
3. Involve staff members in interpretation of test results for the school, and in adjusting instructional plans accordingly.

Cabinet

1. Clarify responsibilities of individuals involved in the assessment program.
2. Approve procedures and recommend policies to the Board of Education.
3. Approve the assessment plan.
4. Receive reports and assign responsibilities for appropriate action.
5. Recommend reports to be given to the Board of Education.

Board of Education

1. Approve policies for the assessment program.
2. Receive reports as determined by Cabinet or requested by the Board.
3. Request follow-up reports as appropriate.

Procedures. There are many issues involved in deciding which programs or projects get assessed or evaluated, what data is gathered, and what is done with the results. Many of these issues are unresolved, but the following guidelines are suggested:

1. The Lincoln Public Schools shall follow an annual planning cycle coordinated by the Cabinet, but involving such other groups as the Board of Education, Principals' Council, Consultants' Council, and the Council on Instruction. The schedule of events shall be approximately as follows:

October - November	Conduct needs assessment: (get views of people about what they perceive needs to be; review available assessment and evaluation data; review existing emphases, goals, objectives; revise goals and objectives as necessary; confirm existing emphases and/or establish new ones).
December - January	Establish goals and objectives related to emphases; develop and consider alternative programs.
February - March	Schools select program areas and establish goals related to school district emphases. Administrators, consultants and others establish job targets for the next school year.
April - May	Cabinet, with involvement of other groups (including ad hoc committees as needed) reviews existing evaluation and assessment plans and makes necessary revisions (based on needs assessment conducted earlier and on declared areas of emphasis).

2. The administrative assistant responsible for the district assessment program shall insure that all assessment data is retained permanently for use by administrators, members of the ESU evaluation team, and others approved by Cabinet. All assessment data shall be stored in such a form as to be readily retrieved and analyzed by computer.

3. If assessment or evaluation data suggests conditions different from those desired, the associate superintendent for instruction and/or the project director shall be requested to prepare a report to the Cabinet detailing plans for appropriate action.

4. Upon recommendation of Cabinet, data from system-wide assessments and selected evaluation reports shall be made available to the Board of Education, usually in connection with briefings on the current program or requests for approval of program changes.

Ron Brandt
Associate Superintendent for Instruction

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